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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i4/4155>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i4/4155

Received: 02 March 2018, Revised: 25 Mar 2018, Accepted: 11 April 2018

Published Online: 26 April 2018

In-Text Citation: (Lee, Johari, Mahmud, & Abdullah, 2018)

To Cite this Article: Lee, G. M., Johari, K. S. K., Mahmud, Z., & Abdullah, M. N. (2018). Sandtray for Children of Divorced Parents. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 1203–1213.

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Vol. 8, No. 4, April 2018, Pg. 1203 - 1213

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Sandtray for Children of Divorced Parents

Gooh Mo Lee^{1*}, Ku Suhaila Ku Johari², Zuria Mahmud³,
Mohd Nasri Abdullah⁴

^{1,2,3} Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴ Institute of Teacher Education Islamic Education Campus, 43657, Bangi, Selangor Malaysia.

Email: moleegooh@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to explore the use of sandtray therapy as therapeutic modality in counseling session to help children of divorce expressing their emotion, cognitive and behavior. This case study was done at primary schools in Malaysia. A total of 3 participants aged 11 years old were involved in the individual counseling sessions. The data collection and analysis information collected from counseling, interview sessions with the parents and teachers before and after the counseling session and the participants' sandtray products. This research aims to observe and explore the emotion and behavior in children of divorced parents during sandtray therapy counseling session. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The coding procedures are mainly open, axial and selective to extract and organize developing themes and therapeutic model in counseling. Results of this in-depth interview were then organized and analyzed by using NVivo version 7.0 in order to construct themes and therapeutic model for counseling session. Significant themes regarding the participant's responses to sandtray therapy were reported and discussed. The findings show that through the therapeutic of sandtray therapy, the participants were able to explore and express numerous emotions, face their problems, communicated better themselves and make a meaningful process in counseling session.

Keywords: Sandtray Therapy, Counseling, Therapeutic, Emotion, Behavior

Introduction

Children habitually are frightened that when their parents divorce, their relationship with one or both parents will suffer. Hetherington (1989) suggests that, in comparison with older children, young children may be less capable of realistically assessing the causes and consequences of divorce, may feel more anxious about abandonment, may be more likely to blame themselves, and may be less able to take advantage of resources outside the family to cope with the divorce. All of these factors may contribute to findings that young children experience more problems

after their parents' divorce than do children who are older when the divorce occurs (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989).

Sandtray therapy is progressively acknowledged as an effective therapeutic tool for school counselors in assisting children of divorce. Generally, sandtray therapy has been an effective technique used in the healing process in United States, Europe and Asian countries. Sandtray is an expressive and projective activity used in counseling, in which clients use miniatures and a sand tray, to create a scene representing a part of their world which is then processed with the counselor (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). The standardized sandtray (roughly 30 by 20 inches and 4 inches deep) is partially filled with wet or dry sand, and presented to the client with a variety of small items or toys that serve as miniature representations of objects and people in a client's life (Boik & Godwin, 2000; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). Therefore, sandtray therapy can be used by school counselors during the counseling session as it is natural, non-threatening form of play, which is not constrained by verbal or intellectual ability.

It is a therapy that allows children of divorce to externalize a problem and begin to deal with it, usually in a metaphoric, symbolic or narrative way, from a safe distance and in an acceptable manner (Bratton, Ceballos, & Sheeley, 2008; Swank & Lenos 2013). The literature (Amato, 2001; Clarke-Stewart, 2006; Elmaci, 2006; Hetherington, 1999; Holst, 2006; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Leon, 2003; Portnoy, 2008) confirms that divorce can increase a child's risk for emotional and behavioral discord. However, there is limited information regarding effective treatment approaches to help young children appropriately adjust. In order for children to adjust following parental divorce, appropriate treatment interventions must be developed and utilized. Sandtray therapy may help children adjust following parental divorce.

Background of the Study

The number of divorces in Malaysia has more than doubled in just eight years from 2004. In 2012, a whopping 56,760 divorces were recorded, which is equivalent to marriage breaking down every 10 minutes (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia). The latest available statistics from JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia) show that 77 Muslim couples dissolve their marriages daily and the number of Muslim couples getting divorced rose from 47,740 in 2012 to 49,311 in 2013. The National Registration Department also recorded a rising divorce trend between non-Muslim couples from 2008-2012 (from 6,573 to 9,020 cases).

Divorce is a chaotic experience for children (Amato, 2010). They are dealing with a range of emotions and issues including grief, sadness, loss, anger, establishing new relationships, learning new roles in the family system and establishing new communication patterns. There are three phases in the divorce process, i.e. from the first stage of a divorce, during a divorce and after the divorce. The most challenging level and almost 50% of conflicts will occur in the first stage of a divorce (Rafidah, Yee, Zuria, Salleh & Amla 2011). Consequently, children who experience parental divorce tend to have more emotional, social, behavioral, and learning problems than individuals from intact homes (Cohen, 2002; Nair & Murray, 2005; Weir, 2006). Children with divorced parents tend to display greater levels of anxiety, depression, anger, and antisocial behavior than individuals whose families remain intact (Clarke-Stewart, 2006). Negative beliefs regarding divorce (i.e. parental-blame, self-blame, and/or fear of abandonment)

can increase anxiety and create a poor self-concept in children experiencing parental divorce (Cummings & Davies, 2011).

Therefore, sandtray perhaps the most developmentally appropriate modality to help children with divorced parents. Sandtray is a type of play therapy (Felton, 2016). Play is a natural language for children to express and communicate their feelings, thoughts and experiences (Landreth, 2002). According to Bratton, Ray, Rhine, and Jones (2005), play therapy is developmentally appropriate approach designed to prevent or eliminate psychosocial problems and attain a level of optimal growth and functioning. This modality provides children with an age-appropriate and emotionally safe environment (Plotkin, Liz, 2011). The play therapy process allows people of all ages and developmental levels the opportunity to express and resolve their particular issues. Sand tray therapy is a play therapy technique that utilizes a tray partially filled with sand and a large collection of miniature figures This approach is conducive to a child's need to express him or herself in a nonverbal and nonjudgmental environment (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

Objectives

This research aims to observe and explore the emotion and behavior in children of divorced parents before and after sandtray therapy in counseling session.

Literature Review

Furthermore, parental divorce increases helplessness to long-term emotional difficulties including depression and anxiety (Douglas, 2006). Foulkes (2001) found that children with divorced parents were more aggressive, had more problems with concentration, and displayed more acting out behavior toward their parents. In 2006, Holst asserted that these children often become less secure and lonelier than children from intact families. Portnoy (2008) argued that children from divorced families obtained lower scores on academic achievement, emotional adjustment, social interaction, and behavioral measures.

According to Bratton, Ray, Rhine, and Jones (2005), play therapy is a developmentally appropriate approach designed to prevent or eliminate psychosocial problems and attain a level of optimal growth and functioning. This modality provides children with an age-appropriate and emotionally safe environment (Ray, Armstrong, Warren, & Balkin, 2005). The play therapy process allows people of all ages and developmental levels the opportunity to express and resolve their particular issues. Sandtray therapy is a play therapy technique that utilizes a tray partially filled with sand and a large collection of miniature figures (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). This approach is conducive to a child's need to express him or herself in a nonverbal and nonjudgmental environment (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

Many children are at-risk of experiencing maladjustment following parental divorce (Amato, 2001; Cohen, 2002; Hetherington, 1999; Holst, 2006; Portnoy, 2008). Sandtray therapy has been effective in treating many populations (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005). According to Draper, Ritter, and Willingham (2003), sandtray therapy has been beneficial in helping children and adolescents adapt to traumatic events in their lives. Plotts, Lasser, and Prater (2008) stated that

sandtray therapy has been successful in treating a wide range of disorders including adjustment disorders, affective disorders, eating disorders, and abuse.

Research Methodology

Qualitative case study methodology was used in this research. It aims to give a detailed of a case study of using sandtray therapy in counseling session among children of divorce. This research also uses method of interview towards three parents and teachers before and after the sandtray therapy counseling session as supporting data.

Nasri (2017) explains that interview is practical to be used in order to obtain accurate information from small population. The sample in this research is chosen by using purposive sampling method, where a group of respondents that represent the population are identified and all individuals in this group are taken as sample. Researcher has obtained the information on children of divorced parents from Education Department and school.

Researcher has done face validity and reliability as being suggested by Bogdan & Biklen (2003) and Abdullah & Jasmi (2016) which is inventory validation of semi-structure questions by supervisor and experts, data triangulation, field note reports, diaries as well experts' confirmation of interview inventory that has been built. In this study, the process of sandtray therapy during the counseling session and interview are the main data. The observation and document analysis are the supportive data to confirm, strengthen and prove the facts of the sandtray therapy during the counseling session and the interview (Table 1).

Table 1: List of agreement analysis protocol by specialist panel

No	Name	Representative	Post and qualification	Specialization	Agreement
1	Expert A	Faculty of Psychology and Education UMS	Associate Professor Dr,	Psychology	Strongly Agree
2	Expert B	Faculty of Psychology and Education UMS	Senior Lecturer, Dr	Psychology	Strongly Agree
3	Expert C	Melaka Tengah District Education Office	Head of Human Resources Management	Counseling	Strongly Agree
4	Expert D	Melaka Education Department	Head of Sector, Students Affair	Counseling	Strongly Agree
	Expert E	Teacher Training College, Seremban	Senior Lecturer	Counseling	Strongly Agree
5	Expert F	Teacher Training College, Seremban	Senior Lecturer	Counseling	Strongly Agree

Research Findings and Discussion

Based on the in-depth interview that was conducted with the parents and teachers before the sandtray therapy in counseling session, findings show the emotional effects of divorce on children are sadness, anger, worry and rejected.

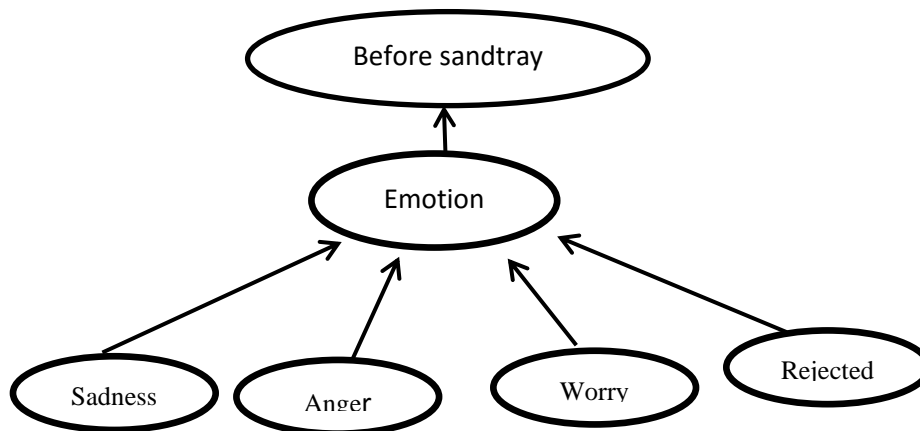


Figure 1. Children's emotions before the sandtray therapy

Children from divorced families have more emotional and behavioral problems (Weaver and Schofield, 2015). According to Amato (2001), divorce brings many changes in children's lives and the effects are long lasting. Based on Figure 1, finding show the four main emotions that effect children of divorced parents. They felt sadness, anger, worry and rejected All these four main emotions are very close and related to each other. The results is similar to the view of Marsha (2007) and Rafidah et al.,(2011) that stated children of divorced parents tend to felt sad, anger, worry and rejected. Amato and Sobolewski (2001) also approved that children experience a wide range of emotional reactions including sadness, anger, worry and rejected.

The statement of interview with the parents below proves the four main emotions that effect children of divorced parents.

(KIBC:TB1)

"My child was sad after he knew we were divorced"

"It's sad, the kid experiences feeling like one of his parents left."

"My husband and I recently divorced, and our three children have been having anger issues"

"My child worry that I will leave him after our divorce".

"My child felt rejected by their classmates at school"

The statement of interview with the teachers below proves the four main emotions that effect children of divorced parents.

(KIBC:TBG1)

“His always looks sad in the classroom”

“He easily gets angry”

“He is worry that his parents will be fighting at home”

“He felt rejected by his classmates”

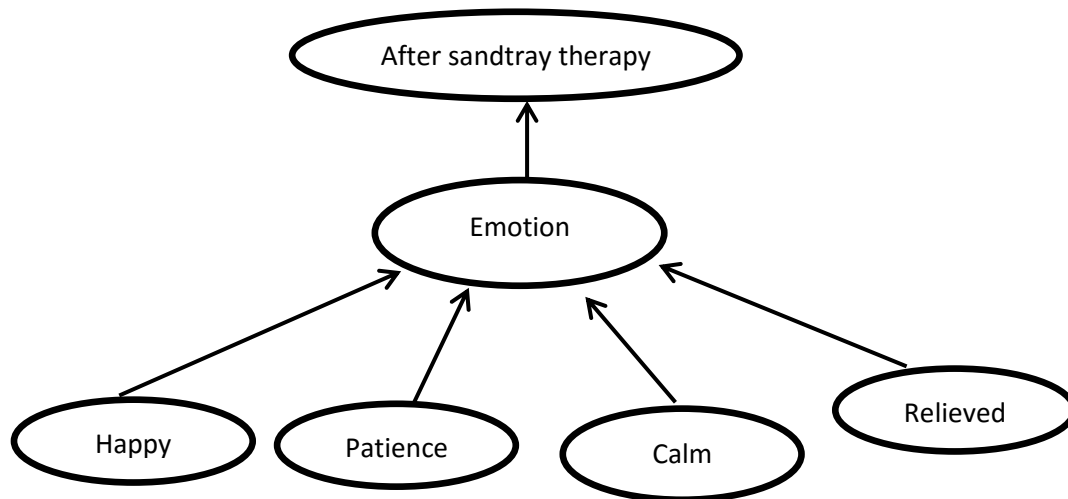


Figure 2. Children’s emotions after the sandtray therapy

Based on the in-depth interview that was conducted with the parents and teachers before the sandtray therapy in counseling session, findings show the behavior effects of divorce on children are angry, sad, lost and worried.

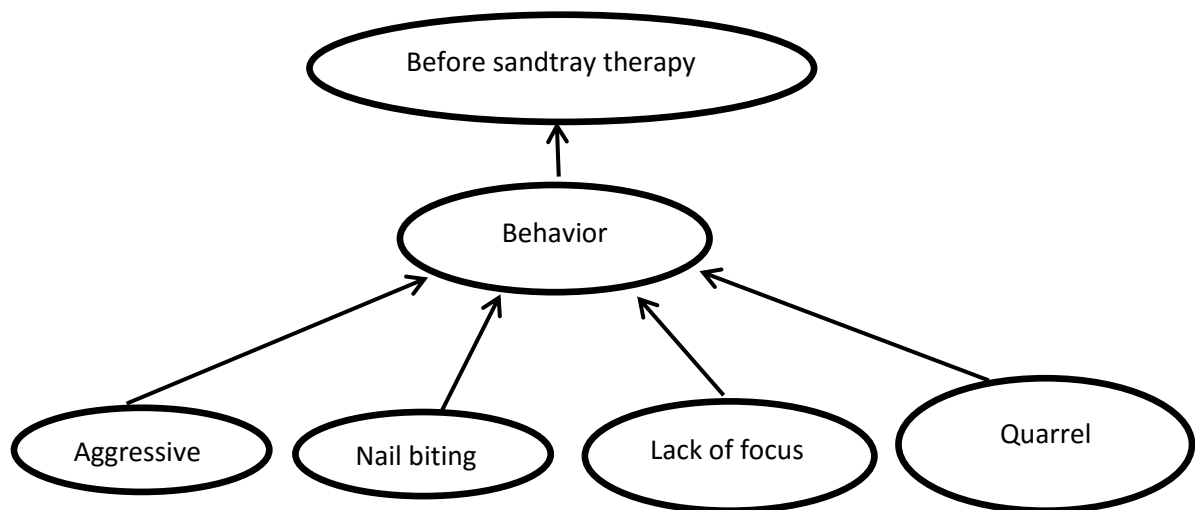


Figure 3. Children’s behavior before the sandtray therapy

Based on Figure 3, finding show the four main behaviors that effect children of divorced parents. All these four main behaviors are aggressive, nail biting, lack of focus and quarrel. Ghanizadeh (2008) agreed that 20% of the research confirmed that nail biting due to divorce. Fergusson et al.

(2014) also approved that children of divorced parents are likely to exhibit disruptive behavior, such as disobeying a teacher or behaving aggressively towards family and peers.

The statement of interview with the parents below proves the four main behaviors that effect children of divorced parents.

(KIBC:TB2)

“My child is aggressive”

“I cannot stop my child’s nail biting

“My child cannot focus in his study”.

“My child quarrel constantly”

The statement of interview with the teachers below proves the four main emotions that effect children of divorced parents.

(KIBC:TBG2)

“He always fight with his friends”

“He loves nail biting during the lesson in the class”

“He lack of focus in the class.

“He is rebellious”

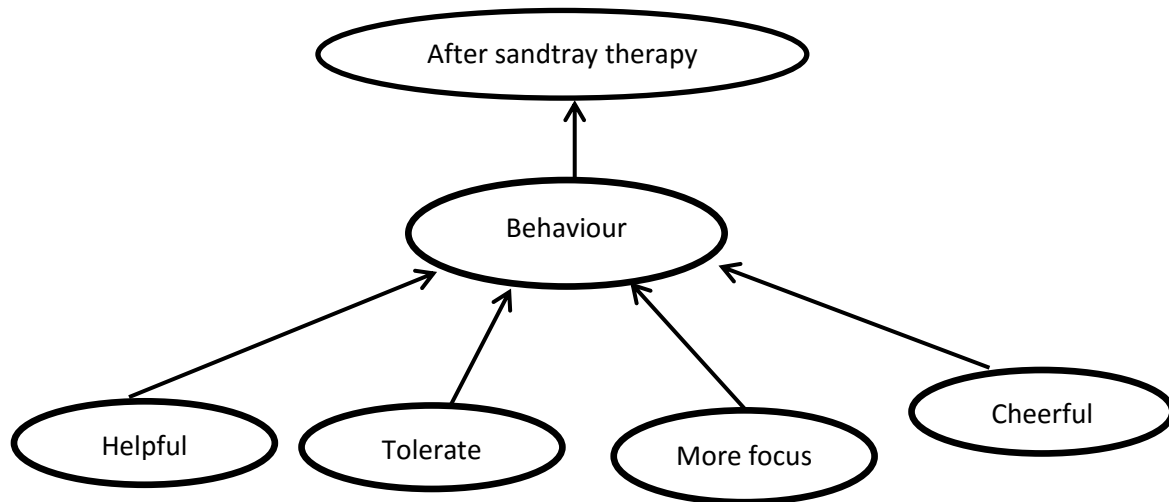


Figure 4. Children’s behaviour after the sandtray therapy

The findings are equivalent to the findings by Plotkin, Liz.(2011) who stressed that sand tray sandtray therapy is a beneficial therapeutic intervention for boys and girls between the ages of six and ten who have experienced parental divorce. Children who participated in sandtray play therapy following parental divorce showed significantly less internalizing and externalizing behavior problems as compared to children who did not participate in sand tray play therapy. Ku Suhaila (2015) also agreed that sandtray can be used by school counselors during the counseling session to help children to feel free to share in the most open way possible. Felton (2016) also

agreed that sandtray is a creative method to help students to cope with their inter- and intra-personal struggles. Kestly (2015) also mentioned that sandtray provides an opportunity to process life experience through a tangible, visible procedure which is both fun and intensely meaningful, both intimately revealing and symbolically concealing. The process of healing takes place while playing with the sand and figures, without the need for interpretation, verbalization or conscious awareness. These findings conclude that the use of sandtray during counseling session has helped children of divorce to express their inner fears, conflicts, questions and unresolved experiences in a safe environment.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that sandtray is a safe medium for expression because play is the language of children. Sandtray provides a multiple intelligences perspective and may meet the specific needs of children with particular cognitive and socio-emotional difficulties more effectively than the traditional 'talking' therapies. Hence, sandtray is a valuable tool for school counselors in assisting children of divorce as it is a natural, non-threatening form of play, which is not constrained by verbal or intellectual ability.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Ku Suhaila binti Ku Johari and Prof Dr. Zuria binti Mahmud from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Dr. Mohd Nasri bin Abdullah from Institute of Teacher Education Islamic Education Campus for their suggestions and guidance in the writing of this manuscript.

Corresponding Author

Gooh Mo Lee, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia.

Email: moleegooh@gmail.com

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